

ARE ADDITIVES BAD FOR US?

Food additives have their place, but many of these chemicals are unnecessary and have far-reaching health effects, writes dietitian **Karen Inge**.

Do food additives worry you? If the answer is yes, then you're not alone. Many Australians believe that additives, such as preservatives, are harmful to our health and that artificial colours cause behavioural and learning difficulties, such as ADHD. Yet the truth is while some adults and children are sensitive to food additives and will experience mild to severe side effects, most of us won't.

As a general rule of thumb, the ones most likely to cause problems are those that are not essential. They "dress up" the food to make it more appealing, such as artificial colours, flavour enhancers and some preservatives.

And the good news is that the number of processed foods without these "chemical culprits" is growing significantly. So, why were they added in the first place and what do they mean for your family's health and wellbeing? ➤

WHAT IS A FOOD ADDITIVE?

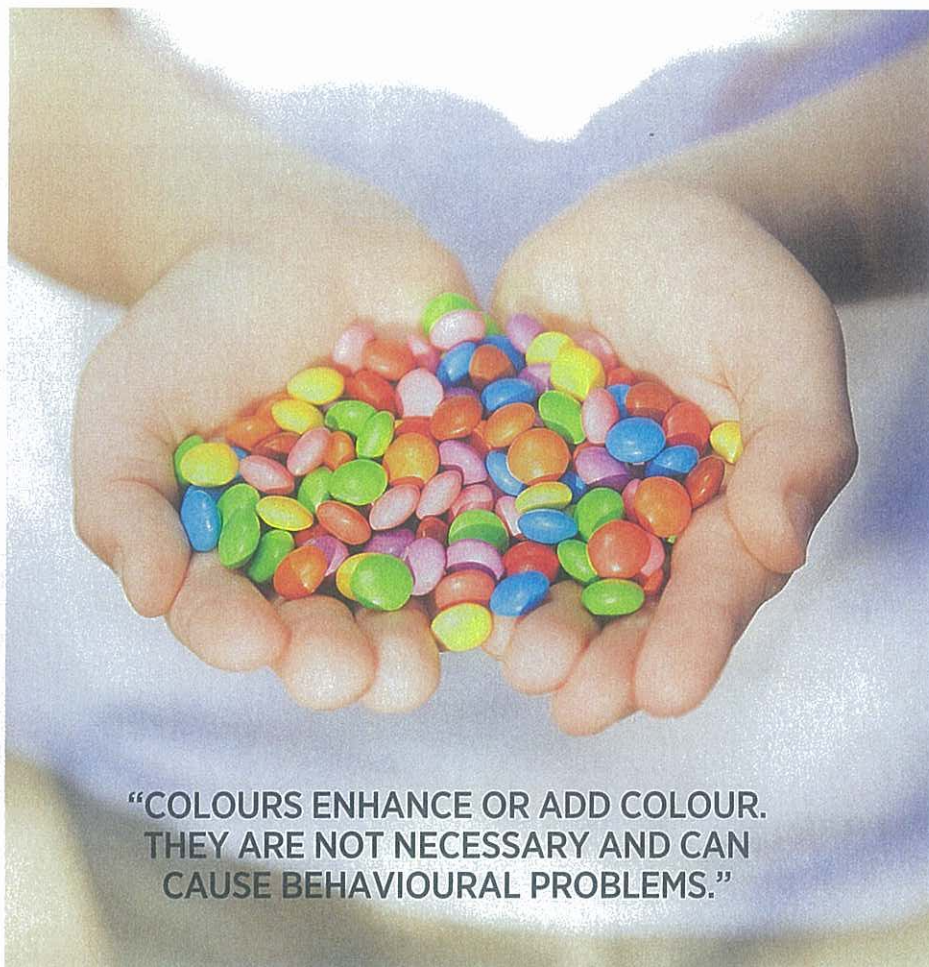
Food additives are added to foods to keep them fresh, preserve their flavour or enhance their colour, taste, texture or appearance. They can extend shelf life and ensure food is safe to eat.

Food additives are chemical substances, some made in laboratories, such as artificial colours and flavours. Others are derived from nature, such as cochineal (120), the red dye from an insect, or extracted from a food, such as lecithin (322) from egg yolk, or the thickener (410) derived from the locust bean. Yet just because an additive is "natural" doesn't mean it won't cause problems for food-sensitive people.

WHAT DO ADDITIVES DO?

Here are the most common additives and their functions:

- Anti-caking agents stop ingredients from becoming lumpy.
- Anti-oxidants prevent foods from oxidising or going rancid.
- Artificial sweeteners increase the sweetness without the kilojoules.
- Emulsifiers/stabilisers ensure that oil and water mixtures (such as dressings) do not separate into layers, plus they stop fats clotting together.
- Food acids maintain the right acid level, important for taste and controlling bugs.
- Colours enhance or add colour. They are not necessary and can cause behavioural problems, especially when consumed in large amounts.
- Humectants prevent foods from drying out.
- Flavours restore losses from processing, while flavour enhancers improve the existing taste and/or aroma.
- Mineral salts enhance texture.
- Preservatives stop microbes from multiplying and spoiling the food.
- Thickeners enhance texture.
- Stabilisers help stop ingredients from separating.
- Flour treatments improve baking quality, while glazing agents improve appearance and can protect food.
- Propellants help propel food from a container.



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The Australian New Zealand Food Standards Code requires food labels to list all ingredients in descending order by weight, including food additives. They must be identified by their class name and an individual name, such as flavour enhancer (monosodium glutamate), or, for simplicity, a code number can be used, such as flavour enhancer (621).

ARE FOOD ADDITIVES SAFE?

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and bodies overseas ensure additives are safe and rigorously animal-tested to determine the safe level for humans. Usually this is 100 times the maximum, where "no observable effects" are produced by an additive consumed over the test animal's lifetime. If there is any doubt over safety, approval is not given and if new scientific information suggests that a food additive is no longer safe, the approval for that additive is withdrawn.

While this is reassuring for the majority of us, it doesn't help those who are food-chemical sensitive because, in some cases, even small amounts of the offending chemical can cause upset.

REACTIONS TO FOOD ADDITIVES

For most people, the majority of additives are not a problem. However, 50 of the 400 approved additives in Australia have been associated with adverse reactions in some people. These reactions include:

- Digestive disorders – diarrhoea, colicky pains.
- Insomnia, irritability.
- Behavioural problems – ADHD.
- Respiratory problems – asthma, rhinitis, sinusitis.
- Skin problems – hives, itching, rashes, swelling.

To put reactions to additives in perspective, the leading cause of food allergies and intolerances are natural: milk, wheat, eggs, nuts, seafood and soy.

If you believe you have any food intolerance, then medical diagnosis is important. If you try to diagnose yourself, you may restrict your diet unnecessarily and neglect an illness. The Dietitians Association of Australia website (daa.asn.au) can help locate an Accredited Practising Dietitian to help and the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital's allergy website (www.sswahs.nsw.gov.au/rpa/allergy) is also useful. ➤